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USIA'S INTEGRATION INTO THE STATE DEPARTMENT: ADVOCATING POLICY TRUMPS PROMOTING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

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USIA'S INTEGRATION INTO THE STATE DEPARTMENT: ADVOCATING POLICY TRUMPS PROMOTING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

"It is one of Senator Helms' greatest accomplishments as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," says a senior staff member of the Foreign Relations Committee. "Taking on the bureaucracy against the wishes of the Executive Branch is almost never done, especially when one is not facing a crisis. The reorganization of the foreign affairs agencies is a remarkable achievement."[1]

On October 1, 1999 the United States Information Agency (USIA) was abolished and its functions were transferred to the State Department, ending a four-year battle between the Clinton Administration and Republican Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator Jesse Helms on the fate of USIA. The integration of USIA into the State Department is remarkable, not only for the reasons the senior staffer noted above, but also because it ensured that American public diplomacy at the beginning of the 21st century would be defined by more policy advocacy and less promotion of mutual understanding.

In this paper, I will offer my view of the factors that led to Senator Helms' remarkable achievement. I will argue that a much reduced budget, a lack of a strong vision for USIA in the post Cold War era, and partisan politics, left the Agency very vulnerable. But, in the end, it was the new globalized world of instant information and round-the-clock media coverage that sealed USIA's fate. The information technology

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[1] Senior Senate Foreign Relations Committee Staff Member, Interview by Neil Klopfenstein, December 6, 2002.

revolution dealt "policy advocates" a stronger hand than the "promoters of mutual understanding," thereby allowing the move of the USG's public diplomacy functions to the State Department. I will also ask, three years after the fact, if integration was the right thing to do.

The Age-Old Debate

Why was USIA created in the first place? One would think that all diplomacy functions, including "public diplomacy," would naturally be the purview of the State Department. Indeed, the existence of USIA, along with the administration of its public diplomacy functions, has been the subject of almost constant debate since the Agency's inception in 1953 to its end in 1999.

As a practitioner of public diplomacy, I would argue the debate centered on credibility. To understand why credibility is so important, one must be familiar with the several functions of public diplomacy. The 1975 Stanton Report, officially titled "International Information, Education and Cultural Relations: Recommendations for the Future,"[2] identified four principal public diplomacy functions. The functions follow:

1. Exchange of Persons- These programs, both educational and cultural, support the ultimate goals of US policy by promoting the exposure of Americans and peoples of nationalities and cultures to each other. Their objectives are thus to build *mutual understanding* in areas most important to preserving friendly and peaceful US relations worldwide and to help develop a reservoir of people who can exchange ideas easily, can identify common objectives, and can work together to achieve these objectives…
2. General Information- This function involves the dissemination overseas of general information about American society and American perceptions of world affairs rather than specific information about US foreign policy… The purpose is to support foreign policy, by building the context within which

[2] The Stanton Report was one of many reports issued by blue ribbon panels that studied how best to organize and operate the US government's public diplomacy activities. The Stanton panel was chaired by Frank Stanton, then chairman of the American Red Cross.

policy is understandable and by creating a favorable image of the US overseas which will help it be successful…

3. Policy Information- This function includes the official articulation and explanation of US foreign policy overseas; it is the presentation of the US Government stance on foreign policy questions of immediate concern; indeed, it *is* policy to those who hear it and do not experience it directly…
4. Advisory- This function involves making available to decision makers, for their consideration in the policy formulation process, information on the state of foreign public opinion and predictive analyses as the effects upon such opinion of potential policy decisions…[3]

The Stanton report notes that the first two functions perform a support role that is somewhat removed from day-to-day policy concerns, whereas the latter two functions have an extremely close relationship with the formulation and execution of foreign policy.[4] The first two functions, exchange and information programs, exemplify American idealism in our foreign policy and are long-term oriented. With these programs, we are confident that American exceptionalism and the strength of our cherished American ideals and values will triumph on their merits (without embellishment) and that seeds sown today will reap sweet fruit in the future. The latter two functions, policy advocacy and providing public affairs advice, demonstrate realism in our foreign policy and the need to act immediately. Here, we know that we must craft our message carefully and trumpet it loudly and quickly because our opponent will do the same. Therein lays the "credibility" debate.

Generally, the first two functions promote mutual understanding between the United States and a foreign country. The audiences and consumers of these services are

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[3] Center for Strategic and International Studies, "International Information, Education and Cultural Relations: Recommendations for the Future", (Washington, DC, 1975), p. 6-7.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 6.

students, cultural elites, journalists, researchers, opinion shapers, and, in some cases, the general public. Today through these functions, the USG seeks to exert what Joseph Nye calls American "soft power" – our values of openness, diversity, tolerance and freedom. From the early days of USIA through the Vietnam War, many of our mutual understanding programs had a very strong and overt anti-communist message. This "hard line" approach, however, was discarded in the mid-70's when the mutual understanding programs were removed from the State Department and placed in USIA because, as the Stanton Reports says, "…the communications revolution[5] has educated the world to a greater skepticism concerning the things governments say about their societies. Hence, there is a great need…for credibility to convince others that a program run by the American Government is presenting an objective picture of American society."[6] This new doctrine for implementing the USG's mutual understanding program called for… "(the) program and the agency which runs it (to)…maintain a certain distance from the foreign policy process. This is…due to the need for credibility… (T)he ability of officers to cultivate a climate of opinion abroad sympathetic to American policies and ideas assumes a kind of independence that would be facilitated by their detachment from the day-to-day formulation and conduct of American foreign policy."[7] The rationale was that only by maintaining a distance and independence from the State Department could the USG's mutual understanding programs be implemented credibly, and thus effectively.

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[5] Some would add Vietnam and Watergate, such as Richard Pritchard in our readings and Ambassador Gutierrez in seminar.

[6] Center for Strategic and International Studies, p. 12.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Articulating and delivering our foreign policy message, as well as offering advice on the public affairs impact of our policy, also requires credibility. To the consumers of this message, mostly foreign journalists, academics and decision-makers, credibility comes from knowing the message is accurate and timely, which happens only if the deliverer of the message (generally the press attaché) is plugged into the policy process and has access to the people who made the policy and is involved in crafting the message. If the messenger sits on the sidelines (by intent or neglect), the savvy consumer will quickly realize this and do an end run around the messenger to a more credible source such as the political attaché or Deputy Chief of Mission. Credibility is equally important within the bureaucracy. For his colleagues to solicit and accept advice on the public affairs impact of a foreign policy, the public affairs advisor must first be invited to the table to participate in the discussion and then be viewed as "on board" with the policy (and not perceived as "letting every flower bloom," which is what he may be doing when wearing his mutual understanding hat). For the public diplomacy officer charged with policy advocacy functions, being housed in USIA provided a huge challenge. Often, the physical and mental distance between the State Department and USIA was immense. Because of this challenge, many of USIA's press and policy officers always felt that they would be far more effective (and better off professionally) in the State Department. [8]

Thus, the age-old debate – how does one credibly balance the promotion of mutual understanding with the advocacy of policy? How does one credibly run the

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[8] Senior former USIA Official #1, Interview by Neil Klopfenstein, December 17, 2002.

government's press programs while simultaneously administering the government's exchange programs? In a nutshell, what is the best way to implement the nation's public diplomacy functions --from within the State Department or by an independent agency?[9] The debate had been on-going since USIA's inception in 1953!

In 1992, the case for an independent public diplomacy agency still held sway over placing the Government's public diplomacy functions in the State Department. Although not robust, the Agency's budget was adequate – enough to sustain its mission. The Cold War was over, but total victory had not been declared. There were still wavering hearts and minds to be won. And finally, the information technology revolution, although just beginning, had not yet exploded. USIS offices overseas were still the major (if not only) source of information on US foreign policy, American culture and American society in most foreign countries, especially in the developing world. The internet was in its infancy and 24/7 international news coverage had not proliferated. Things began to change rapidly, however, after the election of President Clinton in 1992.

The Road to State

Ironically, with the election of President Clinton, the USIA rank-and-file was hopeful about the future of the agency. It was generally thought that Clinton, an international exchange alumnus and protégé of Senator Fulbright, understood the value of people-to-people exchange and appreciated (and would support) the Agency's mutual understanding programs. In addition, although many were disappointed that a high profile name such as David Gergen was not appointed to lead USIA, the nomination of

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[9] Some proposals called for dividing the functions between the State Department and USIA. Another recommendation proposed placing the cultural and exchange functions in the Smithsonian, while moving policy advocacy and information functions to State. There were many recipes over the years.

Joseph Duffey, personal friend of the President and former college president and director of the Cultural Affairs Bureau at State during the Carter administration, ensured that the new director had access to the top and understood the Agency's public diplomacy mission. The hope proved short lived.

A number of factors converged in the 1990's to doom USIA and push public diplomacy functions into the State Department. First was the huge federal budget deficits of the early 1990's. President Clinton, along with the Congress, made balancing the federal budget a top priority. The USIA budget, like most other agencies funded from discretionary spending accounts at the time, was subject to the budget ax. From 1993 through 1999, USIA's budget was downsized by over 50%. [10] Around the same time, Vice President Al Gore launched his reinventing government initiative (National Performance Review). In January 1995, Vice President Gore "instructed four foreign affairs agencies to establish common administrative services, eliminate unnecessary duplicative practices, and use the private sector and competition to cut costs." The Review concluded that "[USIA] will close five USIA posts abroad and consolidate and downsize selected American centers in East Asia. The agency is also reducing costs in book programs, eliminating selected publications and developing new ways to finance overseas student advising and counseling services. USIA will eliminate duplication in its information centers and libraries and its research activities, and further reduce

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[10] Office of Management and Budget, The Budget of the United States, Fiscal Years 1990-2001, (United States Government, Washington, DC). The budget reports show that USIA's budget peaked at $1.084 billion if fiscal year 1992, then declined sharply to $758 million in FY1993, bottoming out at $450 million in FY 1997, then rebounding slightly to $475 million in FY1999, USIA's last year of existence.

headquarters layering in its management bureau."[11] Aside from personnel reductions, the cuts took their greatest toll on the capital intensive exchanges and general information (mutual understanding) programs. In the mid-90's, an already very small bureaucracy by Washington standards was facing cuts that affected its viability.[12]

A "lack of vision" for the Agency after the Cold War, as well as uneven leadership, is another important reason behind USIA's demise. A source on the Hill said, "USIA was not nimble enough to look ahead (for example, to the problems we are now facing in the Arab World).[13] It was too focused on the past – a Cold War relic." She added, "Where was the leadership?"[14] A senior USIA official said, "We had always argued our essentialness in fighting the Cold War. What was our post-Cold War mission? The leadership never answered that."[15] A senior State Department official noted, "USIA had had some wacky directors in the past. The last director was not an articulate advocate for USIA and its role." Of course, USIA was not alone in its lack of vision. I paraphrase Brent Scowcroft in his recent address at NWC, "In the first decade after the Cold War, we just coasted and took a breather after the tensions of the Cold War. After all, Fukiyama was arguing the "end of history" and that everyone was on the road to

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[11] Office of the Vice President Press Release, The White House, "Gore Announces Initial Restructuring of Foreign Affairs Agencies," (Washington, DC; January 27, 1995).

[12] Top officials in town hall meetings with the rank and file warned of several years of deep and sustained cuts. Many wondered out loud how USIA could remain viable if the cuts continued.

[13] Although perhaps not visible to the outside world, one senior USIA official argued that USIA adapted better to the end of the Cold War than did the State Department. He cited USIA's I Bureau reorganization, exchange program changes and early investment in new technology. (Senior USIA Official #1).

[14] Senior Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff member.

[15] Senior former USIA official #2, Interview by Neil Klopfenstein, December 20, 2002.

becoming open, free-market, democratic societies." Convincing the world to become open, free-market, democratic societies had been USIA's mission for the last fifty years. So with the "end of history," it is perhaps not surprising that USIA lacked vision. But with no mission, it is hard to justify one's existence.

Politics also played a role in USIA's fate. Had Senator Helms, no fan of the foreign affairs community, not chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee after the 1994 elections and not sought to challenge a weakened President Clinton, foreign affairs reorganization might never have taken place. A Hill staffer admitted that even though Senator Helms strongly believed in reorganization, there were political points to be gained by taking on the President. She added, "No one takes on the bureaucracy lightly."[16] Also, had newly confirmed Secretary of State Albright not wanted to try to build a good working relationship with Senator Helms and not wanted to ratify the Chemical Weapons Ban Treaty, she might not have agreed to support foreign affairs reorganization legislation, which President Clinton had vetoed 18 months earlier. [17] And finally, had USIA a strong domestic constituency like the Department of Defense or the Social Security program, reorganization might not have been an issue at all. USIA's only constituents are American academics and universities affiliated with the Fulbright Program, local councils of international visitors, international journalists and our audiences overseas (who do not vote and to whom the Congress rarely listens). Norwegian journalist Jon Arne Markussen would have given strong testimony to preserve USIA. He wrote on the acknowledgements page of a book he authored about the United

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[16] Senior Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff member.

[17] Rebecca K.C. Hersman, "Friends and Foes: How Congress and the President Really Make Foreign Policy," (Washington: Brookings, 2000), p. 89.

States, “I would like to [t]hank to the United States Information Agency (USIA). It is an independent, official agency that Senator Jesse Helms and other like-minded members of the American Congress would like to kill.”[18]

The most important reason why USIA was folded into the State Department, in my opinion, was the information technology (IT) revolution. The IT revolution made news instant to virtually everyone around the world. Today, when a policy is announced in Washington, it is immediately broadcast around the world. No longer does an Ambassador receive a cable first and then meet with his country team to decide how best to disseminate the information in his host country. When bombs are dropped on Kabul, it is reported in real time on 24/7 CNN and the local press calls immediately for reaction. No longer does the press attaché have the luxury of waiting until the next day’s news cycle to respond. And, when the President gives a speech at the UN, the foreign journalist retrieves the text from the internet. No longer does he wait for the Embassy to send him the transcript in the Wireless File. The IT revolution made it absolutely necessary for the press and policy folks to sing from the same sheet of music—right now! “Everyone realized that we needed to speak with one voice in this new globalized world,” said one senior USIA official. The need for closer cooperation and coordination between press and policy officers elevated the relative importance of the policy advocate functions and in turn, significantly bolstered the argument for integration of public diplomacy functions into the State Department. [19] Ironically, the IT revolution also simultaneously weakened

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[18] Jon Arne Markussen, “Frihet og Frykt: Naerbilder av USA,” (Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, Oslo, 1996), p. 280.

[19] Interestingly, it was USIA, not the State Department, which had the foresight to embrace the technology revolution. Even in times of rapidly shrinking budgets, USIA made a significant investment in

the standing of USIA's mutual understanding programs. With the long budget knives out in the mid-90's, one frequently heard these questions: Why should we spend money on cultural programming when American culture is everywhere?; Why should we spend money on exchange programs when it is so easy to travel and study in the United States without government help?; Why do we have libraries overseas when everyone can get any information they want on the internet? Although no one really thought mutual understanding programs were bad, many just did not think they were affordable anymore.

In summary, I argue that four factors converged in the mid-1990's to spell the end of USIA. Severe budget cuts diminished an already small agency's viability. An unarticulated "vision" for USIA in the post Cold War era and a sense that the world's hearts and minds had been won weakened the *raison d'etre* for both funding the USG's public diplomacy functions (especially the Agency's "mutual understanding" programs) and housing them outside the State Department. Bigger fish (e.g., USAID, the CWB treaty) and Senator Helms' political tenacity, in combination with a weak domestic constituency, made USIA a very vulnerable and disposable pawn in the partisan political battles of the mid-1990's. And finally, the information technology revolution, along with a proliferating international, 24/7 media, drove policy makers to seek better ways to coordinate and control the "message." This pursuit finally settled the age old debate on where to house the USG's policy advocacy function in favor of the State Department. On October 1, 1999, the forty-six year-old United States Information Agency ceased to exist.

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new technologies. At the time of integration in 1999, almost every public affairs section in the world had desk top access to the world-wide web and had posted and managed a local embassy web page. In my last post, as of June 2002, the rest of the State Department sections in the Embassy still had not managed to "catch up" with the public affairs section regarding use and access to new technology.

All of the US Government's public diplomacy functions were transferred to the State Department.

Was It the Right Thing to Do?

Was it the right thing to do? It is an appropriate question to ask now after more than three years of integration and the world-changing events of 9/11. Both of my senior USIA sources said the jury is still out.[20] [21]

One source said that public diplomacy officers have never been so engaged in the policy process as they are now. This seems to be true in both Washington and overseas.[22] Thus, from a policy advocacy perspective, the move to State appears to have met expectations and proved to have been the right thing to do.[23]

It is in the mutual understanding arena that my USIA colleagues (and I) are not yet convinced that integration has been a success. After the events of 9/11 and with the rise of anti-Americanism around the world, especially in Muslim nations, no one now disputes the importance of mutual understanding programs. Indeed, many lament the budget cuts of years past and are now calling for substantial increases in funding for these efforts. But in spite of this awareness, one USIA source said, "Many in State do not understand the culture of public diplomacy." [24] He was referring to what I quoted from the Stanton Report above: "[Mutual understanding programs] must maintain a certain

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[20] Former Senior USIA Official #1.

[21] Former Senior USIA Official #2.

[22] Former Senior USIA Official #1.

[23] When reviewing a draft of this paper, USIA official #2 took issue with my assessment. He said many public diplomacy officers still do not feel sufficiently integrated into the State policy process.

[24] Former Senior USIA Official #1.

distance from the foreign policy process"[25] and an officer's "ability…to cultivate a climate of opinion abroad sympathetic to American policies and ideas assumes a kind of independence…facilitated by their detachment from the day-to-day formulation and conduct of American foreign policy."[26] This misunderstanding of the public diplomacy culture seems to be corroborated by a senior State official who said, when asked what he thought about working with USIA officers overseas, "I didn't like all aspects of the USIA culture. They were sometimes reluctant to support policy."[27] Herein lays the misunderstanding. I would argue that USIA officers were not reluctant to support policy, but rather they were concerned that their independence might be compromised, and in turn, their credibility with contacts diminished. Let me illustrate with an example.

In August 1981 a young Norwegian journalist set off for a five week tour of the United States to write about the election of Ronald Reagan and the rightward shift of the American electorate in the early 80's. USIA staff in Norway and the United States facilitated the trip with advice and by opening doors and making appointments. The resulting book, entitled "Amerika Blues," would not have pleased the policy advocates (or likely any of the diplomats in the US Embassy in Oslo at the time). Elvik, from social democratic Norway, did not have much flattering to say about the conservative wave sweeping America at the time. But, he did say this about the United States in the foreward of his book: "The USA is an open land. You can go anywhere and ask almost anyone about anything you want. The government runs an organization, the US

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[25] Center for Strategic and International Studies, p. 6.

[26] *Ibid*., p. 6-7.

[27] Senior State Department official.

Information Agency, which helps journalist to do this as effectively as possible. That organization gave me incredibly practical and helpful assistance without batting an eye to ask me what I was going to do or why."[28] Elvik got it! In spite of his criticism of American politics of the day, he captured the essence of America when he wrote, "The USA is an open land."

Twenty years later (to the month), Elvik returned to the United States as the foreign affairs editor of Norway's second largest newspaper, *Dagbladet*. He was sent to cover the United States in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11th. His coverage was the most accurate and empathetic of any in the Norwegian press. When I asked Elvik to sign my twenty-year old copy of his book, he said, "You are the only one who read it." In the fall of 2001, everyone in Norway read what he wrote about the United States.

Was integration the right thing to do? Yes, but with qualifications. Lidell Hart wrote that we need strategists to win the war and grand strategists to keep the peace. On the public diplomacy battlefield, the policy advocates are the strategists and the promoters of mutual understanding are the grand strategists. If the State Department is to effectively conduct public diplomacy in the 21st Century, we need both.

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[28] Halvor Elvik, "Amerika Blues," (Oslo, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag). 1982, p.7.

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